

From the Minister ... 2015

(On sabbatical, January – May)

June, 2015

As I write, the days of my sabbatical are slipping away, soon to be behind me. One song that has come to mind during the past few months has been *Time in A Bottle*, by Jim Croce. In this ballad, he longs for a certain type of immortality. Have we not all felt this way sometimes? How many of us have hoarded mementoes, or scrapbooked old photos and letters – if not in actual albums, then in computer archives? Some say that finitude adds a necessary urgency to our lives, the vital ingredient that transforms the mundane into the precious. And yet, like Croce, we may wistfully pine that “There never seems to be enough time, To do the things you want to do, once you find them...”

There never seems to be enough time. Having said that, I can very much appreciate the privilege of having been able to remove myself from active parish duty for these past five months. Many of you know that while I did not completely separate myself from every current of ALUUC, I did wade into different tributaries that included PFLAG, Conversations on Race, the Greater Springfield Interfaith Association and the Illinois Coalition of Community Services. One new (and unexpected) stream that I have only just begun to explore for the first time in my professional life is prison chaplaincy – I’ll share more about that as it unfolds.

One of the exciting prospects for the coming year is the implementation of a Pathway to Membership. The goal is to offer more depth, deeper connections, a stronger UU identity, and an enhanced sense of being a stakeholder among our new members. One proposal on the table is to move from one “New to UU” session to a series of three sessions that will promote the aforementioned goals. This will require a greater investment of time and energy for all concerned, but it will certainly be worth it.

I hope that everyone will make an effort to attend the Annual Meeting on June 7th. This will be my first Sunday back in the pulpit, and I am looking forward to that experience with all of you. As it happens, that service will include a bridging ritual to celebrate Adam van Hecke and Gwyn Barron, both of who are graduating from high school. And so it goes – as so often happens in life – that sacred space ushers in a convergence of contrasting emotions. Would that we could “save every day like a treasure and then, again, (we) would spend them with you.”

I look forward to resuming my role as your minister and trust that together, we will create many more such precious moments & memories – that will illuminate our own lives and those who will follow us.

July, 2015

Thoughts in the aftermath of the murders in Charleston:

Back in April, I led a worship service at a UU congregation in Missouri, and included a segment on flags of the Confederacy. I shared that the now familiar 3x5 version did not really exist until the 1950's, when it became ubiquitous across the landscape – I advised my audience that while some proponents insist otherwise, that flag was conceived as a symbol of white supremacy – and hostility to the Civil Rights movement. Its appeal was limited only to Whites.

And now, in the wake of the murders in Charleston, the nation as a whole is debating the future of the Confederate flag. I agree that it should be retired from general use, especially if any government is involved. One cannot absolve it of its horrid past, and claim that it is merely a symbol of (white) southern valor.

When General Lee surrendered in April 1865, President Lincoln quipped that the tune “Dixie” was now the property of the Federal Government, won fairly as a prize of battle. One could make the same argument for the battle flags. Unfortunately, the animosity engendered by the war did not fully dissipate in the century and a half since those flags were furled. It seems incredible that new legions still flock to those colours and to racism – and yet, as we were painfully reminded, hatred is as persistent as it is awful.

On June 18th, I joined with other people of faith in a prayer vigil for the Charleston victims. We knew that nine men and women, many of them ministers, had been shot down in cold blood. We knew that the murderer was a young white man, and that he had been captured. People prayed and sang according to their religious backgrounds; we were drawn together both in our horror and our compassion for the victims. I was surprised how quickly some forgave the murderer. In my theology, only the victims and perhaps their families may offer that. On the other hand, I think that these heinous murders have finally forced us as a nation to face the demons lurking in the collective closet — there is a growing consensus that we need to pay more heed to popular symbols, and that we need to speak out against those that promote racism and supremacy.

August, 2015

No article

September, 2015

There is nothing quite like the energy of a new liturgical year! I am always amazed at the rapid stream of new and returning faces, ideas and dreams that surge through the door as summer begins to wane.

I count myself lucky that I had a five month sabbatical during the first half of this year. I was able to travel and study and recharge my batteries. I will be honest, though – I will miss having a Lynnda White or Paul Oakley around – they proved themselves invaluable in creating new opportunities in education and spirituality within our congregation.

You may recall that in his final sermon as an intern, Paul stated that I would no doubt be returning to the fold brimming with all sorts of new ideas and that he hoped that the congregation would be open to them. Surprised by his declaration, I turned to Angela and whispered, “What do you think about Bingo?” But in fact, I had been mulling over new ideas and potential directions to launch during my 13th year of ministry here.

I began to mentally sort through my wish list for ALUUC. Some involved programs: would this be the right time to create a prison ministry? Perhaps to offer chaplain support to the inmates connected to the Innocence Project, and their families? Might there be interest among lay members to become chaplains?

The pace of my brainstorming accelerated: I wondered if we might have a Chili Cook-off this fall; might we seek another intern, or perhaps could I suggest that we consider exploring the role of an Associate Minister? How might we breathe new life into our covenants? How might we deepen our commitment to Standing on the Side of Love (which embraces a range of issues -- championing LGBTQ causes, supporting Immigration-related issues and now, Black Lives Matter)? Could we add more energy to the UU Advocacy Network of Illinois and Conversations on Race?

What new types of fellowship events should we try? How long will it take to clean my office? How do we encourage more people to buy into Scrip? What would the new Pathways to Membership look like? Are there better ways to welcome New Members, new rituals that can be used during worship, excellent hymns that I’ve overlooked? How can we invite our youth to a more active role within worship? How might we promote cross fertilization between ourselves and our sister UU congregations throughout

central Illinois? Can we set a new attendance record? Who will pitch in with the kitchen and cleanup?

As we press forward, I know that many others will share their dream lists too. This year's leadership is brimming with excitement. I sense that this will be a watershed year.

Maybe I will start with cleaning my office?

October, 2015

Words are powerful, and special note is accorded those used during worship. For example, I have heard many remark how much they appreciate the responsive refrain that accompanies the lighting of the chalice:

May the light we now kindle
inspire us to use our powers
to heal and not to harm,
to help and not to hinder,
to bless and not to curse,
to serve you, Spirit of Freedom.

This affirmation is included in the hymnal as reading #453. How many, I wonder, are aware that these words are borrowed from the Passover Haggadah? Rev. David Weissbard, a UU minister, adapted the original to read thus:

May the festival lights we now kindle
Inspire us to use our powers:
To heal and not to harm,
To help and not to hinder,
To bless and not to curse,
To serve the holy cause of Freedom.
Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God,
Ruler of the Universe, who has
sanctified us by Thy commandments,
and has commanded us to kindle
the festival lights.

The version we use was inspired from that rendition. I find them especially poignant because they highlight that our worship – and efforts – are embedded within the context of a community, that we recognize that we have power to affect not only our lives but

those in wider circles, encompassing the interconnected web of all existence. It lifts up that it matters how we use our energies. Also, these words point towards a larger end: to serve the Spirit of Freedom. This therefore is a form of covenant statement. How we fulfill that covenant, and the larger mission of ALUUC, is essential. We understand that when there are many people, there will be many opinions and preferences. This is why we a covenant of right relations is essential, to guide our thoughts as together we discern the paths towards the future. In reality, that covenant mirrors the aspirations articulated in the chalice lighting – both are tender reminders of how we create beloved community.

November, 2015

I have a little confession to make. I like to laugh. A lot. Silly songs, puns, jokes, quips, cartoons and comedies are, in my estimation, tonic for the soul. One laugh is better than a thousand tears.

Some of you may remember how I used to decorate my office door with cartoons. Someone pointed out that the tape was bad for the wood, so I reluctantly removed them. Some of them are on the corkboard inside my office, others are filed away.

Now of course, we can post humorous memes to our heart's content on Facebook. Most I find on-line & re-post. But this week, while checking folders on my desktop, I came across a scan of one cartoon that I had saved nearly 20 years ago. It featured a older, bespeckled minister leaning forward in a majestic pulpit & the caption says, "Let us pray. If any of you are Unitarians, do whatever it is you do." I thought that was a hoot so I posted it last week. Apparently, my friends & especially my colleagues concur – it has been re-posted nearly 115 times at last count.

Of course, not everyone laughs at religion. Personally, I think that whenever people are involved in any enterprise, there is bound to be some humor. Maybe it's best to share jokes about one's one tradition & one's own spirituality. This of course is not to suggest that faith is all fun and games. But it does help one better bear the stresses of life and the inevitable losses.

Mark Twain once declared that there can be no laughter in heaven, adding that the root of all humor is pain. He might be on to something there. No one knew that better than Springfield's favorite son, Abraham Lincoln, who masked his melancholy with mirth. Lincoln was a walking contradiction, like so many universal religious truths. His example reminds me of a story from the Buddhist tradition, when a traveler once asked a monk why the Buddha is generally depicted as laughing. The Monk replied, "Because if he didn't laugh, all that would be left for him to do would be to weep."

December, 2015

Who, indeed, is our neighbor? What new conditional clauses must now be inscribed upon the base of the Statue of Liberty? Or should we embrace the hope and graciousness already expressed there?

As Unitarians Universalists, we deplore Gov. Bruce Rauner's announcement that he would close our great state's borders to men, women and children fleeing from war and terror. We believe in practicing radical hospitality for all, regardless of their religion, ethnicity or national origin.

We encourage all people of faith to stand with us on the side of love, and to contact their elected representatives so that we may provide a welcome sanctuary to these refugees.

Rev. Martin Woulfe
Phillip Anderson, President
Abraham Lincoln UU Congregation of Springfield

Originally published in the State Journal-Register on November 22, 2015